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FEATURE

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Effective parent-practitioner partnerships in children's secondary education

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Abstract

This paper presents results from a qualitative case study project into effective strategies for fostering parent-practitioner partnerships in secondary education in England. It discusses the nature of a true 'community partnership' as a dialogic and productive partnership as opposed to a more common 'information sharing partnership'. In doing so, the paper demonstrates that effective partnerships engage parents, teachers, school staff, but also students to develop a 'three-way-partnership' (parent-student-teacher), making the schools more welcoming places. Finally, the authors argue that schools should find out about and share the values that are important in their communities.

Keywords: parent-practitioner partnership; secondary education; parental engagement; parental involvement; community partnership

Introduction

Parent-practitioner partnerships in secondary education continue to be a challenging and ambiguous area for researchers and practitioners (Costa and Faria, 2017; Bilton, Jackson and Hymer, 2018) with very few qualitative studies exploring effective school-home partnerships in secondary education in England. The existing research illuminates very little positive contact with parents in secondary education (e.g. Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse, 2009; Williams, Sánchez and Hunnell, 2011) and the diminishing role of parents in comparison with primary education (Goodall, 2018). Although some studies discuss new positive pathways in parental engagement (e.g. O'Fee, 2012), the majority of the studies consistently show that parental engagement remains one-sided (Selwyn, Banaji, Hadjithoma-Garstka and Clark, 2011; Bilton *et al.*, 2018), i.e. with parents being passive (Tveit, 2009), and involved as 'neither partners nor opponents' (Bilton *et al.*, 2018, p. 523). The aim of this article is to divulge some of the effective strategies for fostering parent-practitioner partnerships that were identified in three secondary schools in England. After a brief summary of the study's methodology, we present the four main strategies developed by the schools to improve their parental engagement: community partnership; parental 'voice'; a three-way partnership; and positive contact. We conclude the feature article with key messages to schools.

The study

This paper is a practitioner-focused account drawn from a project, developed from September 2018 to July 2019. The research approach was a qualitative multiple case study with three embedded cases (Yin, 2014). Table 1 summarises key information for each case, while Figure 1 summarises the type of data collected.

Table 1. Case information for schools A, B, and C.

Case	Age range of students	Type of school	Location	OFSTED	Number of students
School A	11 – 18	Secondary Academy (run by an academy trust)	North London	Outstanding	1221
School B	11 – 18	Secondary Community (maintained by a local authority)	North East England	Outstanding	1601
School C	11 – 18	Secondary Academy	East Midlands	Outstanding	1205

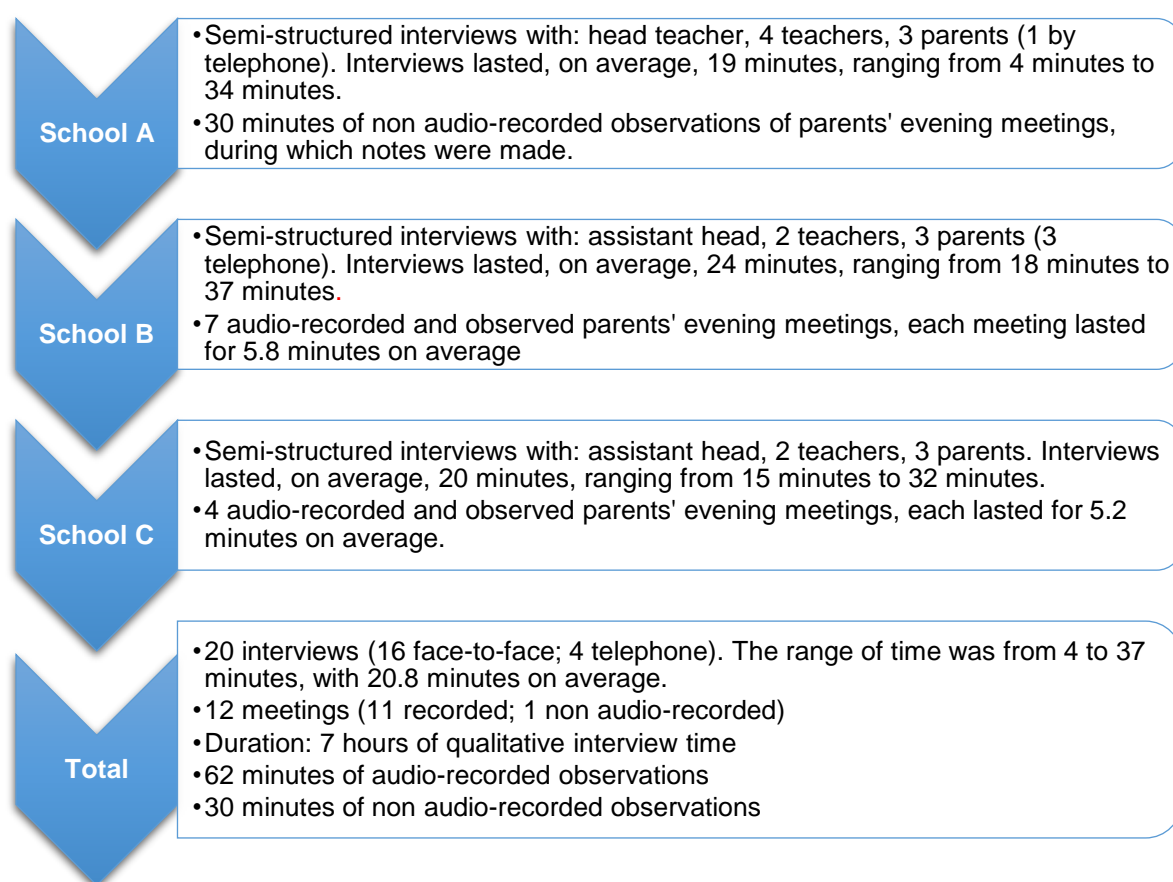


Figure 1. Type and quantity of data collected in schools A, B, and C.

What makes an effective partnership?

In this section, we present the four key strategies developed and implemented by the schools, which were identified as contributing to improve the parent-practitioner partnerships.

1. Community partnership

The findings suggested that the ethos of the partnerships was the creation of a community. As we learned, it was more than a communication strategy focused on mere 'information sharing. It's about engagement in something productive as a partnership' (Head teacher, School A, 2019). When asked what the mission of their partnership was, the head-teacher in this school said that community is a crucial component. It means, as he explained, 'We find out more about what's going on in their communities, in their houses, rather than just assert "this is what the school expects"' and thus, schools become 'places that they can just come to' (Head teacher, School A, 2019). Such a belief means that the schools turn into 'a second home' rather than just a school (Teacher 3, School A, 2019). Schools try to understand what it is about the community that is positive, that they can harness, rather than 'what's negative and we're going to be constantly fighting' (Head teacher, School A, 2019). A teacher in another school noted that they are serving the community and they want the best for it and those students (Teacher 1, School C, 2019). Similar beliefs were expressed in another school: making sure parents can feel like they are part of the community (Parent 1, School B, 2019). Parents indicated that

being part of the school community helps them feel more valued and appreciated by the school (Parent 1, School B, 2019):

At the parents' evening recently, which went really well for my son and the teacher said, "We're aware that pupils' progress is as much to do with parental support as anything else, so thank you for that," that kind of thing's lovely because it just makes you feel valued and that is important, then you feel like you are part of the school community.

In order to promote that sense of community, one of the schools developed a strategy of supporting parents in order to 'help parents be more professional in their roles but also for them to talk to us about what we could do better as well' (Head teacher, School A, 2019). Parents can come and take separate lessons, just as their children, for English and Mathematics in this school (Teacher 2, School A, 2019):

That's part of the 'community partnership' that we do, and that I think started, the English, the literacy was from last year or the last couple of years I think, but the maths was offered this year, so they do literacy and maths, and that's offered for free to parents to come and attend lessons.

The classes were arranged for parents to improve their skills but also to equip parents to support children at home. Overall, all three schools implemented specific strategies that enabled the interactions between parents and school to go beyond the transmission of information about students. These strategies fostered a three-way dialogue on how to support students, and in this way, created an authentic environment of support and community.

2. Parental 'voice': 'Parents brainstorm ideas'

The feeling of the community partnership is reinforced by giving parents a 'voice', as well as supporting vulnerable parents. This means asking parents, 'what do they want?' (Teacher 1, School A, 2019). Schools ask parents to brainstorm ideas about their engagement and the schools' improvement, thereby making parents feel that their opinion matters. Having such a 'voice', as the assistant head explained, is the most essential aspect of developing a sustained partnership which is implemented through (School C, 2019):

Listening to them [parents]. I think if they feel listened to and you're active on the things that they're saying then that can sustain a long-term partnership. If a parent tells you something and you don't act on it, then why would they bother?

Generally, schools aim to listen to parents via different means: becoming a governor in the school (Parent 3, School B, 2019) or having termly 'Parent Voice' events where parents share ideas about the school (Assistant head, School C, 2019). One of the schools has designated events based on parents' interests, for example, an African-Caribbean evening, which in itself is a way of brainstorming ideas as well as a celebration (Parent 2, School A, 2019):

Parents and the school coming together to find out ways of pushing and encouraging the children, it's great for the black children but all kids in general, it's just a fantastic thing that's there, it's a great booster, self-confidence booster and once again, showing

that (...) the people that are around you actually care and that's one of the major reasons why we really do like this school.

This parent clearly feels valued and cared for by the school which celebrates diversity while giving parents a stronger 'voice' and boosting their confidence. Such, and other, informal events (e.g. coffee mornings) are particularly important for vulnerable parents to start engaging with the school (Parent 1, School C, 2019):

Without the intimidation of a parents evening or feeling like you might have some criticism about your child's attendance or about their attitude or behaviour, you can come into a nice relaxed atmosphere and just feel as though you're part of the school, that you're welcomed.

This results in teachers being more approachable for parents as they (Head teacher, School A, 2019):

Feel schools are places that they can just come to and it's not about necessarily great events but it's just creating a space where partnership at an informal level can take place, so that parents think, "This is my school."

This helps the schools to be welcoming places which should be recognised as an extension of part of a child's development (Parent 1, School C, 2019). Parental voice was, then, represented in these three schools as contributing to the school environment. Parental partnership went beyond student support with learning activities and created new spaces for interaction and engagement with the school.

3. A three-way partnership

All schools reported the aim of engaging students alongside parents in a 'three-way partnership' (parent-student-teacher) as compared with a two-way partnership (parent-teacher). This was achieved through encouraging students to attend parents' evenings (Teacher 1, School B, 2018):

As well as teachers having a conversation with the parents, teachers have a conversation with the student, and with them being there it helps to build up a better three-way communication path.

Parents' evenings appeared to be a way of increasing the awareness of student's progress and supporting their achievement. That is, the observations of the parents' evenings revealed that teachers, parents and students often self-reflect on the students' test results, as seen in this example (Observation 1, School C, 2019):

Student: I knew I'd messed up chemistry potato questions.

Teacher: Potato questions? They're in biology.

Student: What? No. Yeah, chemistry questions.

Teacher: So have you always known that's your weakest one?

Parent: Yes, he doesn't like it.

These clearly contribute to students having a 'voice' and agency of communicating their learning progress with their teacher. It also helps to boost students' confidence as 'it's a case of saying "look,

this is what I think you're capable of, this is what I know you can do, let's see if you can try and achieve those potentials as well'" (Teacher 1, School B, 2019). Such explicit help to the students is administered in front of the parents, which means that parents will encourage the child after the parents' evening. This helps to make parents act as 'an extension of the school's arm' (Parent 2, School B, 2019) and helps to 'open the doors' to schools and make parents see what happens in classes in order for them to be able to help (Teacher 2, School B, 2019).

Thus, the involvement of students in the partnerships between parents and schools increases a sense of responsibility and agency of students. Discussions of the students' learning and progress in the parents' evenings by all parties (parent-student-teacher) gives students 'voice' while also appearing to be a way of strengthening parental support from home.

4. Positive contact – 'It's absolutely fantastic'

Linked with the above, regularly contacting parents about their children's achievements and success helps make parents feel appreciated and motivates them to collaborate with the school. Positive contact is 'the ultimate thing. It's so nice for parents to hear from school a positive response rather than your child hasn't done their homework' (Teacher 1, School C, 2019). When parents are informed about children's achievements, they 'take great pride' in it (Teacher 1, School C, 2019). This is also the means of helping parents to support the schools' agenda at home as another parent shared (Parent 2, School C, 2019), 'my child knows if she gets a detention then there's going to be a sanction at home as well, but if she gets an (...) award, even better, then there's a reward.' Parents acknowledge that getting 'nice communication and the positives' is 'absolutely fantastic' (Parent 3, School C, 2019).

Key messages to schools

The four major strategies implemented by the schools in our study were all concerned with creating a special environment of a genuine (Goodall, 2018) community partnership by giving a 'voice' to parents, caring for the communities, and trying to understand the values which are important in the communities. By inviting students into the partnerships, thus making it a 'three-way partnership' as opposed to two-way communication (Epstein, 2011), arranging English and mathematics classes for parents, informal events (e.g. African-Caribbean evening), as well as equipping parents with the tools, which they can use to support teachers at home, partnerships transcend the schools' walls and learning spaces. The schools move beyond mere information sharing by opening doors to parents and making the schools more welcoming places, thus developing a 'school family' (Epstein, 2011, p. 36; Pavlakis, 2018). Figure 2 provides a summary of the key messages to schools.

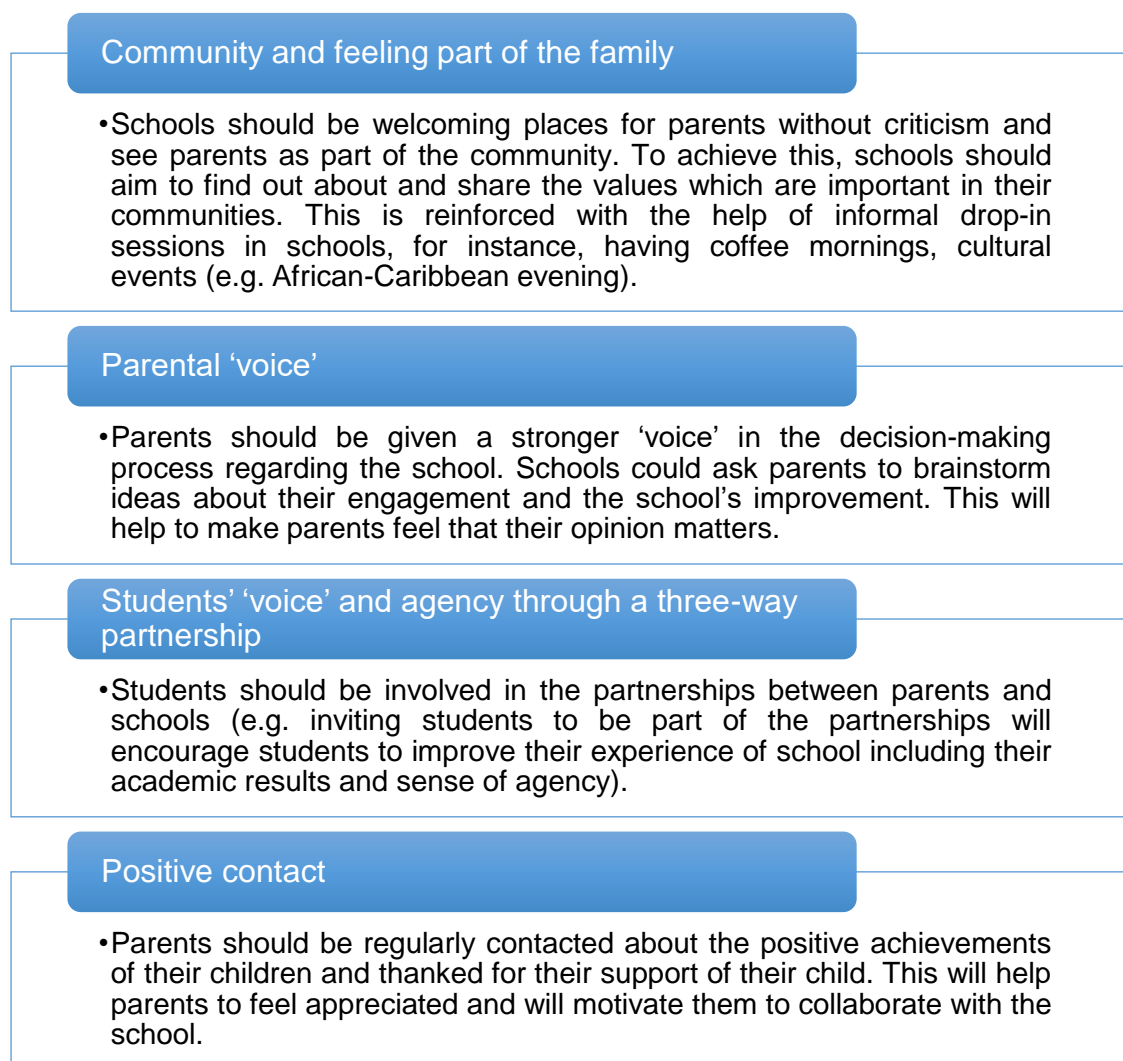


Figure 2. Summary of key messages to schools.

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